

THE OLD TESTAMENT: OBSOLETE OR RELEVANT?

The Old Testament is too often abused in the pulpit. Mostly only Psalms are read without exposition or if exposition is given, it is foreign to the OT Hebrew way of thinking.

At other times the exposition of the narrative passages is thoroughly allegorical and only the phantasy and taste of the preacher sets the limits to the identification of the OT stories with the life of contemporary Christians. On the other hand – preachers who are more cautious – simply do not preach on the OT texts at all.

The following article does not pretend to solve this difficult and complicated problem but is meant to give some clues as how to differentiate between what is in the OT for today and what must be seen through the “glasses of the NT”.

It seems to me, that this problem in the conservative evangelical churches is caused by two at first sight contradictory doctrinal propositions:

(1) The Old Testament is the Word of God. (2) The Old Testament is obsolete and has been replaced by the New Testament.

The first proposition may be understood as if the whole Bible spoke with the same authority, but the second says one part of the Bible is more important than the other.

1. THE NAME AND THE CONTENTS OF THE OT

Thirty nine books of the Bible, that Christians call “The Old Testament”, got this title from Origen who followed in it the New Testament texts (2 Cor 3:14 or Heb 8:13). When we look more closely at these NT texts, we can see that they are not speaking about the thirty-nine books of the Bible but about the covenant that God had made (established) with Israel on Mt. Sinai. In the Second Corinthians the text continues “when Moses is read” and in the Letter to the Hebrews it is clear from the quotation of Jeremiah 31:31-32, that the new covenant is replacing the covenant established at Sianai. The central part of this Sinaitic Covenant was the Law, this is why this covenant is often called “The Law”, or “The Law of Moses”.

This fact is very important for it points out that not all the OT (39 books) is the old covenant (Sinaitic) – only those parts of it, that had been given on the Mt. Sinai and later repeated or otherwise restated in other parts of the OT. About *this* covenant (the Law) the New Testament says that it is “old” (meaning “obsolete”), its commandments have been abolished (Eph 2:15), annulled (Heb 7:18) and although they “were told to those of old” (Mat 5:21) now Jesus says something that is of higher authority.

This division is warning us against treating the non-Mosaic passages as “the Old Testament” as if they were obsolete. On the other hand it also shows it is not acceptable to teach the Mosaic parts without their New Testament exposition – as is often done especially with the Decalogue.

2. COMPARING THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS (TESTAMENTS)

Here are some of the distinguishing marks of the old and the new covenant:

(1) The old (the Decalogue) was written with the finger of God on the tablets of stone (Ex 31:18), the new is written with the Spirit on the tablets of the heart (2Cor 3:3; Heb 8:10).

(2) The old covenant was called “The Law of Moses” (Acts 13:39), the new is called “The Law of Christ (Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:21), “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ” (Rom 8:2) or “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25).

(3) The old covenant was bringing condemnation and death (Rom 5:20), the new covenant brings with it righteousness and life (2 Cor 3:7-11)

(4) The old covenant was given through angels (Gal 3:19), the new was “spoken by the Lord” himself (Heb 2:1-4).

(5) In the old covenant righteousness meant doing the works of the law, but in the new covenant righteousness is reached by faith in Christ Jesus (Gal 2:11,12).

The covenant made by God with Israel through Moses is then called literally “obsolete” and that means invalid (Heb 8:13). This fact is sometimes explained away by dividing the Sinaitic Covenant into three parts: (1) moral or ethical law – basically the Decalogue, (2) the ritual – e.g. sacrifices and other services in the temple and (3) civil law – e.g. the law of inheritance. According to this theory only two later parts have been abolished while the first – the Decalogue, or the ethical part – is still valid in full.

The New Testament does not suggest any such division. On the contrary, when Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount speaks of the Law, he changes specifically some of the commandments that are part of the Decalogue. He uses the word “fulfill” (Mat 5:17) and this fulfillment is interpreted more closely in his next words (Mat 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). The old commandments are changed but the spirit of the Law is upheld.

A Christian exegete has also to mind another simple fact, that two covenants (agreements) cannot be valid simultaneously. If the New Testament (the new covenant) says the old has been abolished, he must carefully see what it means for the reading and expounding the Old Testament as a book. Of course, this is more easily said than done and it requires knowledge not only of the New Testament text but also of its spirit.

In the following part of this article I give some practical suggestions how to distinguish between those parts of the Old Testament (39 books, Hebrew *Tenak*) that cannot be abolished or changed and those parts that have been changed or left out by the New Testament. (Talking about “parts” does not mean it is possible to mechanically dissect the Old Testament into neatly separated passages. These “parts” should be understood theologically which means the same passage may be in one relationship old covenant and new covenant in another.)

3. UNCHANGED “PARTS” OF THE OT

3.1 History

It is obvious that the recorded history cannot be changed. The exegete can find in them the principles of how God is active in the history of mankind, of Israel or even in the personal story of an individual. Applying the principles taken from a historical narrative he should assess the facts on two levels: the laws and customs valid at the time when the events took place – but also on the level of the NT teachings, that decides what can be applied by the contemporary Christian in practical living.

3.2 Wisdom literature

The larger part of the wisdom literature (Proverbs, Job, some of the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) is timeless and can be expounded as such. At the same time it is important to note that the theology of the wisdom literature is often derived from the observation of life and nature without direct (or special) revelation from God. It is therefore necessary to compare it with what the NT says (if anything) on the topic.

3.3 Prophecy

- Historical and eschatological predictions

There are few things in which we can so well see the sovereignty of God over the world and history as in the fulfilled prophecies (historical predictions). Relying on these facts of history we are confidently expecting fulfillment of those prophecies that are still future for us, especially the Second Coming of Jesus (eschatological predictions). In spite of all the dangers that go with these expositions, the Church should not leave out this part of the Old Testament from preaching.

- “New Testament” passages in the Old Testament

We can say that those are “New Testament” passages in the OT, that prophetically or typologically describe the New Testament events or conditions. Such is for example 53rd chapter of the prophet Isaiah. Abraham willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac is an example of a passage that can be taken as a type of a New Testament event.

3.4 The character of God

...is the same today as it was in the Old Testament. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ should not be seen as some severe Old Testament Deity. To make a contrast between the character of God in the Old and the New Testament is an old heresy (Marcion). His attributes can be seen in all the parts of the OT – in his work of creation as well as redemption. Especially rich in description of the attributes of God are those parts of the OT, where God is in dialogue with man (the Psalms and the prophets). Knowing the character of God is one of the results of salvation in Jesus Christ and the early church was studying it from the OT only.

3.5 Spirituality and prayer

With a little exaggeration we can say that the Psalms are the prayer book of the church. It is that part of the Old Testament that is most often read from the pulpit. But exposition should go deeper than just formal “as we see the Psalmist praising God, let us praise God also”. For example, in the poetry of the Psalms there are many abrupt changes of emotional attitude. The exegete should study why. Expression of love for God and praise can be used directly in the New Testament sense. The passages of vengeance against enemies have to be read through Jesus’ words “love your enemies”. (This is a complicated question but the key is always in the New Testament.)

4. ABOLISHED OR CHANGED “PARTS” OF THE OT IN THE NT

4.1 Customary law – up to the time of Moses

The Patriarch in many things simply followed the customs of the culture they lived in. In these things we have to understand, that their righteousness before God was not in their works but in their faith (Gen 15:6). To follow these customs today would be not only contrary to the NT but even contrary to the Law of Moses.

4.2 Promises given to the physical Israel

Although it is true that the Church is the circumcision (Phil 3:3), it is obvious from closer look, that some of the promises can be fulfilled only in Israel as a physical (as opposed to the spiritual) nation. Expounding these passages it is more advisable to discuss God’s relations with Israel than to spiritualize them and try to apply them to the church as “the spiritual Israel”. (How this is done will depend largely on the theological position of the expositor/preacher in the problem of the relationship between Israel and the Church.)

4.3 The Law of Moses (Sinaitic covenant)

All the commandments of the Sinaitic covenant if they should be valid in the New Testament must be in some form repeated in it. In other words, we cannot say something is in force now just because it was not specifically in so many words cancelled. The important guide how to understand this principle is the Sermon on the Mount, that shows how the spirit of the OT Law is fulfilled in the NT.

The problem of sabbath is difficult to solve because although it is a part of Sinaitic legislation that is not repeated in the New Testament, it is also a part of the creation narrative (Gen 1). This means sabbath belongs to the order of old creation and although it is not commanded in the NT and so it is not a condition for salvation it is wise to celebrate it in some form as an institution of God.

This short attempt to show “how to read the OT with NT eyes” cannot get into the difficult questions of hermeneutics. But the above mentioned principles can be used as the basis for further study of this matter.